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Donetsk Miners Rally in Favor of Separatists in Eastern Ukraine

By The Moscow Times

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Miners demonstrating on Wednesday in a show of support for the self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic.”

Up to 1,000 coal miners rallied on Wednesday in support of armed pro-Russian separatists who are battling Ukrainian forces in defense of their self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic," or DNR, in eastern Ukraine.

A day after Kiev unleashed warplanes and paratroopers against the separatists in a major offensive that killed at least 50 rebels, the miners marched through Donetsk city center to demand the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from the region.

There were no reports of fresh clashes on Wednesday, but local residents reported a burst of gunfire coming from the area of the regional state security service building which is occupied by separatists.

"Kiev does not rule us any more, we will no longer accept that," separatist leader Denis Pushilin told the miners, who had been bussed in from around the Donbass coalfield, as a Ukrainian fighter jet roared overhead.

The protesters, from Ukraine's largest mine workers' union, waved DNR flags and banners that read "We will revive the power of the Donbass." The Donbass, comprising coal mines and steel mills, is Ukraine's industrial heartland.

"I want peace and to be able to work and make money. I want the occupying soldiers to leave and return to their Kiev junta," said Valery, who works at the state-owned Abakumova mine.

He said the miners backed the DNR, which was declared after a makeshift referendum on May 11 condemned by Kiev and the West.

Fascists

Echoing Russia, the separatists often refer to Kiev's pro-Western authorities as "fascists" who they say seized power illegally after mass street protests toppled Ukraine's Moscow-backed President Viktor Yanukovych in February.

The separatists prevented voters in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk from taking part in Ukraine's presidential election on Sunday, which brought to power Petro Poroshenko, who favors closer economic and political ties with the West.

Poroshenko, a confectionery magnate, has said he is willing to grant eastern Ukraine greater autonomy but only within Ukraine. He has ruled out negotiating with the armed rebels.

Russia wants an immediate end to Ukraine's military offensive against the rebels. It has denied arming or training the separatists, who have taken power in several cities and towns across the region, but says their calls for autonomy from Kiev are legitimate and should be addressed.

Pushilin said "more and more volunteers" were crossing Ukraine's long eastern border from Russia to support the DNR.

"We will drive fascism away," he said.

Coal miner Vladislav said he hoped Russia would recognize the DNR as an independent state, adding: "But I can also live on bread and water if that is what it takes to win independence."

The Union of Mine Workers to which most of Wednesday's protesters belong has close links to the Party of the Regions, which ousted president Yanukovych once led.

Some independent miners' unions distanced themselves from Wednesday's rally in Donetsk.

"We did not organize this action," said Mykola Volynko, head of the Independent Miners' Trade Union of the Donbass, on Ukrainian television.

"They [protesters and the Party of the Regions] continue to do everything to break up the country."

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